

## Ken Schroeder, 1974–1989

It was people who moved me to work with the United Farm Workers. The energy and sense of mission that I saw in the farmworkers and other staff who had come to my home state of Connecticut to promote the UFW boycotts made an impression on me. I had read about Cesar Chavez and was attracted to the UFW's use of nonviolent action to advance their cause. Staff members at that time were full-time volunteers who worked long hours and were paid \$5 a week plus room and board. I observed that they were optimistic and worked with passion and commitment. I wanted to be around that energy and I wanted to work on the root causes of injustice. I began distributing boycott leaflets at supermarkets. Soon we had a boycott committee and were talking to churches, unions, and students. I got to know the staff very well, and one organizer moved into our house. Eventually, I decided to join the full-time staff.

Shortly after joining the UFW staff in Connecticut in 1974, I was assigned to Montreal and later to Toronto to organize boycott support in Canada. With the passage of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, the focus changed from boycotting to organizing farmworker union representation elections. I moved to Delano, California, in 1977 and worked on organizing, negotiations, and contract administration. During the 1979 Imperial Valley vegetable strike, I assisted in negotiations with research on the economics of the industry. That strike resulted in another boycott, and I went back to Toronto and Connecticut. In the summer of 1980 I returned to California to work on table grape negotiations in the Coachella Valley. Next, I lived and worked in Delano. I also managed the Lamont field office. I traveled to negotiate in Salinas, Modesto, Stockton, and Woodland. In 1984 I went to the Stockton and Livingston field offices. From Stockton I did negotiations in Dixon and Napa. My wife, Debbie Miller, and I worked together in the same locations during all this time. In 1985 our son, Daniel, was born. (We have since divorced.) My assignment in 1986 was to work on research and on direct mail fundraising at the union headquarters at La Paz, in the mountains east of Bakersfield. In 1988 I was back in the northern San Joaquin Valley with negotiations in Napa, Modesto, Stockton, Fresno, and Coachella. I left in 1989, having worked 15 years on the union staff.

Cesar Chavez came to New England after the 1973 grape strikes, and I had gone up to Boston to see him. I met him as we chopped vegetables together for dinner in the kitchen at the boycott house. I was struck by his friendliness, his choice to help prepare dinner, and his vegetarianism. Over the years he made many efforts to persuade us of the benefits of being a vegetarian.

During this and subsequent boycott visits by Cesar, I observed the many security precautions that were taken to protect him. He had received death threats, and union members had many times been the targets of violence. I was present at a negotiations session in Los Angeles during the 1979 vegetable strike when a phone call was received saying that one of our strikers had been shot. A second call came saying that he had died. We left in shock to return to Calexico, where a candlelight vigil and funeral mass were held

for 28-year-old Rufino Contreras. In 1983, during a dairy election, 21 year-old Rene Lopez was shot. Our organizer at the Fresno County dairy was unable to get through to La Paz on the phone, so he called the Delano field office. I answered and relayed the message on our microwave phone system to Cesar Chavez, who left immediately for Fresno. Lopez was the fifth UFW person killed since 1973.

As the founder of the UFW, Cesar Chavez was a visionary and a powerful presence. He was an advocate of nonviolence, but I don't recall him talking about it much. He believed that nonviolent action is something that you do, not talk about. At a staff meeting in La Paz, Cesar led a discussion on whether the UFW was a union or a movement. I don't think we ever resolved that issue. The UFW was both. As a union it meant a better life for farmworkers working with a union contract, but it was more than that. Workers at nonunion employers received the benefit of better wages simply because of the union's presence. Chavez and the UFW were also a source of inspiration to people in the cities and across the country as an example of how to fight for dignity and against oppression. Chavez also saw how issues of justice were connected, as he was one of the first labor leaders to speak out for peace and for gay rights.

The boycott was a strategy to enlist the aid of consumers to help the farmworkers win justice in the fields. The boycott moved the struggle from the rural towns and fields, where the growers held power, into the cities, where the UFW could build strength. The genius of the boycott was its simplicity. If enough consumers stopped buying grapes, the grape growers would be economically pressured to deal with the farmworkers and their union, the UFW. The prospect of not being able to sell all their grapes at a profitable price would convince the growers to agree to union contracts and to treat their workers more fairly. In U.S. and Canadian cities, people learned of the plight of the farmworkers and the boycott gave them something to do. The simple act of boycotting grapes was a valuable contribution to the cause. People could also support the boycott in a range of other activities. Millions of people responded to the boycott appeal.

How did the boycott grow to have such influence? The ingredients included a compelling cause (the farmworkers), an effective strategy (boycott), a strong core of committed activists (boycott staff and volunteers), and a responsive public. A typical boycott campaign would begin with raising awareness about the problem of the farmworkers and the existence of the boycott. Later a supermarket chain would become the focus of the boycott in an effort to persuade that chain to stop carrying the boycotted product. A successful campaign would build such public support that the chain would eventually choose to honor the boycott. Attention would then focus on another chain while efforts to build consumer support continued. This would be happening in all the major market areas where the product was sold across North America.

When I joined the Connecticut staff, the boycott had for some time been focused on A&P supermarkets, one of the major grocery chains in New England. We had been picketing its stores in several states. The campaign was building up to a visit from Cesar Chavez, who

would bring increased attention to their lack of cooperation with the boycott. Just days before his arrival, the chain decided to honor the boycott, removing grapes completely from their stores.

Canada was an important market for California grapes. In Quebec the two dominant chains were Dominion and Steinberg's. The boycott was directed at Dominion, with weekly picket lines throughout the Montreal area. We did a "human billboard" action with more than 100 boycott supporters holding very large boycott signs along a major thoroughfare. One of our marches in central Montreal on a frigid, windy December day had good participation and we were exhilarated that so many had come out in such weather. We had support from the Catholic Church, the United Church of Canada, many religious orders, and all the major Quebec unions. At that time in the mid-70s, there was much conflict between English and French speakers. All our leaflets and newsletters were bilingual and our organizers in central and east Montreal spoke French. After our Saturday supermarket picket lines we had a potluck supper and sang well into the night. We had a multiracial, multilingual, international staff and we learned songs from everyone's traditions. We sang "We Shall Overcome" in English, French, and Spanish at our meetings. One of our local supporters said that the UFW was one thing that English and French speakers could agree on. While the Dominion campaign was going strong, we were talking to other chains. Steinberg's agreed to respect the boycott and to not sell non-union grapes in their stores. Upon successes like these, the boycott grew.

A large Canadian delegation traveled to the UFW convention in 1975. As we marched into the Fresno arena behind the flags of Canada and Quebec, the delegates erupted into sustained cheering and applause. Farmworkers with tears in their eyes left their seats to hug these Canadians who had come so far to support them and their boycott.

Boycott successes were temporary and had to be constantly monitored. When a grocery chain agreed not to sell grapes, it seemed that it was just a matter of time before they put grapes back on the shelf to see what would happen. We had a system for boycott supporters to do weekly checks to ensure compliance with agreements. Our office had a big map of the city with different-colored pins showing where all the different chain stores were located.

The teacher of the boycott method was Fred Ross, the man who originally mentored Cesar Chavez in organizing. Fred developed a plan to build a grassroots organization to support and promote the boycott. It was a simple, solid plan that involved beginning with personal visits to individuals who were asked to invite others to a house meeting in their home. At the house meeting the guests learned about the UFW boycott and were asked to hold further house meetings. The process continued until there was a sufficient amount of active support to hold an area-wide meeting. The same organizing was happening in other parts of that urban area. Boycott supporters educated consumers, worked to persuade stores not to sell grapes, got boycott endorsements from organizations, and raised funds.

Eventually the boycott became a substantial force that supermarkets and California growers could not ignore.

The boycott campaigns ran on small budgets and the solidarity of others. One of the most rewarding aspects of the boycott was the opportunity to meet and work with some of the most interesting and committed people in the city. We met students, church folks, labor union members, and others who generously gave their time and resources. Our office space and equipment were donated. We worked with community people who adopted the farmworkers' cause as their own. It seemed a miracle that so much activity resulted from our efforts. It was always a great source of optimism for me that so many supported the boycott once given information and an action that they could take.

In the 1960s, the boycott resulted in the grape workers winning union contracts. In the 1970s, after a second series of boycotts, the agricultural industry agreed to a farm labor law, the Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA), which gave farmworkers in California for the first time the legal right to have union elections and collective bargaining. Farmworkers have historically been among the least powerful groups in our country. That they were able to achieve such results with agriculture, the largest industry in California, was a stunning accomplishment.

When the ALRA was passed into law in 1975, we were faced with a dilemma. With the advent of farmworker elections in the fields, it seemed to the supermarkets and to the public that we had accomplished our goal and there was no need for a boycott. The union had a boycott organization spread across North America and was hesitant to dismantle it, not knowing what was going to happen next. Would the farm labor law be effective? Would the growers follow the law? Would they negotiate union contracts? Some of the organizers were called to California to work on the elections in the fields and others of us stayed in the cities. We tried with varying degrees of success to keep the grape boycott going. We also worked on a series of more obscure boycotts of individual companies that were not cooperating with the law or not negotiating union contracts in good faith. By 1977 most of us were in California to work in the union field offices in the agricultural areas or in the union main offices at La Paz.

The UFW had field offices scattered throughout the valleys of the state. There was a cycle to the work there that began when workers at a ranch were interested in being represented by the union. An organizing campaign among the workers was done by staff organizers with the worker leaders. When sufficient strength was reached, there was a petition for an election under the ALRA. When the union won a majority of the votes, the election results were certified and the employer had a legal obligation to negotiate with the union over wages, benefits, and working conditions. A staff negotiator worked with a negotiating committee of workers to reach a settlement with the company on a collective bargaining agreement, or contract. Once there was a contract, a ranch committee of elected workers administered the contract together with a staff person. Contract violations were dealt with

by filing grievances, which were enforceable by arbitration. When the contract expired, typically in one to three years, the negotiations began once again.

The biggest obstacle to success was company resistance at each stage of the process. During elections many growers campaigned against the union up to the point of firing workers. Legal appeals at every stage could drag proceedings out for years. Over time, the workforce turned over so that negotiations that began several years after the election would have not have the same group of workers. When negotiations began, some growers' attorneys went through the motions of bargaining with no intent to reach an agreement. And some companies instigated decertification elections to vote the union out. An industry of consultants and lawyers developed to represent employers and fight unionization.

The union staff in the field offices was a group of farmworkers and former boycott staff. We were recognizable for our fleet of white early 1960s Plymouth Valiants. Those of us who didn't speak Spanish learned as quickly as we could. It was inspirational for me to work with the courageous people that I met in the fields and in their homes. The strong sense of common mission that we shared is rare. There was deep satisfaction seeing workers win elections, sit across a negotiating table with their employers as equals, and settling and administering their union contract. What was most rewarding for me in my work with the UFW was taking what I had learned and using it to help others identify their goals and work toward achieving them.

In our nonviolent fight to win justice for farmworkers, I believe that we struggled in being nonviolent and just with each other and with ourselves. We threw ourselves into our work. For long periods we pushed ourselves to exhaustion by working virtually all the time. Other areas of our lives, like our families, suffered. There were times when some staff members were inexplicably fired and others were isolated and pushed to quit.

Work with the union was a total investment of oneself. Cesar and others in leadership were devoting their lives to the movement and the staff members were expected to do the same. And not just day to day. If one left the staff, it was often seen as disloyalty. At the end of my time with the union, my life was out of balance, with little time for anything but the work. I was living in Modesto and covering contract negotiations from Napa (100 miles north) to Coachella (450 miles south).

The late 1980s were a difficult time for the UFW. There were fewer union contracts, organizing was more challenging, the boycott was not as effective as in the past, the political climate in Sacramento and Washington was hostile to the union, and the farm labor law was not functioning well. There was conflict and mistrust within the union. Many longtime staff members were gone. When I decided to leave in 1989, my resignation was met with anger and silence. My letters attempting to wrap up personal business with the union went unanswered. It was a very painful experience.

The lessons I learned with the UFW have served me well and I have tried to pass them on: organizing is helping people put their ideals into action. Pay attention to details and don't make assumptions. Education is important, but so are inspiration and action. Ordinary people with a common vision can accomplish great things. Be flexible. Be clear on core values. Begin and learn as you go. When faced with setbacks, be persistent. If peace and justice are the goal, then practice peace and justice on the way to the goal. Nothing is permanent. Keep learning.

What has been accomplished? The public became aware of the farmworkers who produce our food. Workers' lives improved as union contracts provided decent wages and health and pension benefits. People learned to stand up and speak out despite their fear. Even when long-fought-for gains were lost, the changes in the lives of people remained. Cesar Chavez said that once people are educated they cannot be uneducated, and that once people are not afraid they cannot be oppressed.

It is a disgrace that widespread poverty among farmworkers still exists in our wealthy country. Some workers and their children have been able to move to better paying occupations. Individual successes, however, do not change the injustices that continue in the fields. That change will only occur through the empowerment that comes with a union. I wish strength and hope to those who continue in that struggle.